

THE NEW ENGLAND
ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH.

ORGANIZED FEBRUARY 23, 1901.

LEAFLET
NO. 67

BOSTON HIGH SCHOOL
OF COMMERCE PLAN.

JANUARY 1
1909

COÖPERATION IN ENGLISH.

Co-operation seems to have been the slogan of the meeting at Springfield. The particular phase of co-operation in which English teachers are most vitally interested was clearly presented by Prof. Gardiner, of Harvard. Referring in a recent letter to his "doctrine," he writes, "If we could get a reform of this sort started, I believe we could do more to save the time of children in the schools and improve the efficiency of teachers than in any way that I know." To aid in this work of "reform", I have here outlined the plan of co-operation now followed in the Boston High School of Commerce,—a plan referred to by Prof. Gardiner.

Co-operation between teachers of English and those of other subjects is nothing new. It has been carried on wherever a knot of teachers have conscientiously studied the welfare of their pupils, the efficiency of the school, and their own ultimate release from the drudgery of excessive theme correction. Several years ago, in one of the bulletins* of this organization, Mr. G. H. Browne described the plan then in operation in the Browne and Nichols School. For many issues, the catalogue of the Boston English High School has contained the following statement: "Every instructor is to some extent a teacher of English, for no written work in any subject is accepted unless neatly written and properly spelled, punctuated, and arranged; and no work defective in these respects receives any credit until it has been revised and rewritten." In other schools, to my own knowledge, teachers have labored together to prevent the undoing in one department of the work done in another. It is not then as an original scheme, but as a practical and practicable means of solving some trying problems, that I present our plan.

It was found at the very outset that several teachers were co-operating quietly, as if such work were part of their regular routine, by correcting errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar. The

* Leaflet No. 3, October 1901, Successful Combination Against the Inert.

English department felt, however, that these teachers were not only taking too much upon themselves, but were also wasting much time and strength. Investigation showed that when papers were returned, pupils were interested enough in examining their errors in substance and in finding their marks, but were blind to the corrections of spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Further inspection showed that the same mistakes were repeated, only to be corrected again by the patient teacher and ignored by the heedless boy.

To overcome this condition it was suggested that the mark assigned in a subject should be lowered in case of any mistakes in English. It was objected to this proposal that the mistakes under discussion were of two forms: the first bearing upon clearness of substance, the second upon correctness of form. It seemed just that a subject-teacher should insist upon clearness, and should assign a low mark for answers that were so obscure as to strain his ingenuity in eliciting the meaning. On the other hand, it seemed unjust and dishonest—however effective—to give the impression by a low mark that a pupil's knowledge of his subject was slight, when the recorded failure was due to poor spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure. It was decided therefore that failure to secure clearness should be indicated by the subject-teacher, and should result in the lowering of the mark in the subject; and that failure to secure reasonable correctness in the three points mentioned should necessitate the rewriting of the paper before any credit in the subject should be given.

Emphasis upon these points, however, was not enough. There are other principles—of force and smoothness, for example—that can become fixed in the pupil's mind only by constant practice. Even granting that subject-teachers recognize the importance of these, it is unjust to expect them to insist upon the observance of them. To keep the pupils on the watch for accurate, effective, and smooth composition in all their work, they were informed that at frequent, though unstated, intervals their papers in other subjects would be corrected by their English teachers, to ascertain their observance of the principles taught in the English classes. The marks thus obtained are entered upon the regular composition work, and unsatisfactory papers are revised or rewritten,—the same as unsatisfactory themes. In addition, subject-teachers are urged to send batches of papers whenever pupils seem to be growing careless,—a condition that often prevails immediately after the correction of sets of papers in subjects other than English.

It may seem that by this plan the burden thrown upon the English teachers is greatly increased. In spite of the fact that a regular English theme may, at the option of the teacher, be omitted when the papers in another subject are corrected and revised, there is an additional burden. We hope, however, that increasing care on

the part of the pupils will bring increasing relief to the teacher from the drudgery of correcting needless mistakes.

Naturally many problems present themselves in the carrying out of this plan, and occasionally cause the English teacher to appear inconsistent. In our school, the subjects between which and English co-operation may be most advantageously carried on, are History, Commercial Geography, Social Industries, Civil Government, Business Law, and Economics. Science, too, offers an opportunity for occasional co-operation. In co-operation with the teachers of foreign languages the teachers of English are confronted with an annoying difficulty. The influence of the foreign idiom is strong, and is especially potent when the teacher is himself a foreigner. In translation, pupils readily become satisfied with English that is acceptable to their language teacher, and fail to have at their command the sort of English that will, upon a test, give them immunity from revision or rewriting in an English class. Again, complaints are not infrequently made by the teachers of foreign languages that the English written by the pupils is not above reproach, when an inspection of the papers shows that a pupil was trying not so much to express his thoughts, as to conceal his ignorance, being at a loss for the meaning of words essential to an intelligible translation. Occasionally too long a passage is set, or pupils are told to translate as far as they can in a given time. In such cases, the average boy will think first of rapidity and try to please his subject-teacher by the amount finished, rather than consider the chance that this set of papers may be collected by his teacher of English.

A summary of the plan shows that the subject-teacher demands that the work be clear, and substantially correct in spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure. Failing to secure the first, he lowers the pupil's mark and at his option, demands revision; failing to secure the second, he withholds all credit until the work is presented in a satisfactory form. The teacher of English insists that every piece of writing shall be regarded by the pupil as an English theme to be corrected, revised, and rewritten, and to count in the making up of the mark in English. The collection of papers at unexpected moments convinces most pupils of the un wisdom of "taking chances;" for even if the English teacher fails to collect a set, the subject-teacher is likely to send him any piece of slipshod work.

The English department, however, has no right to consider only its own gains. It is quite incumbent upon teachers of English to co-operate for the good of other departments; and it is quite as possible. Poorly written themes are put in the pigeon-hole of the teacher of penmanship with the query whether the writing is as good as may reasonably be expected of pupils who have had ample time for the completion of their task. Upon his verdict depends the rewriting of themes before credit is given.

Again a conscientious attempt is made to teach pupils how to answer questions in other subjects. We correlate the English work in the first year with History; in the second, with Commercial Geography; in the third, with Local Industries and Civil Government; in the fourth, with Business Law and Economics. By drawing upon these branches for occasional subjects, and correcting the themes orally for sentence structure, unity, mass, and coherence, we try to train the pupils to bear in mind the principles of English while their attention is focused upon another subject. Similarly in connection with science, descriptions of apparatus and expositions of experiments are required, and the teacher of science is consulted as to the adequacy of the productions from a technical standpoint. With foreign languages the English department has found most need for co-operation in drill upon points of grammar as they are taken up in German and in French.

It has been seen, I hope, that this scheme has at heart the good of the pupils, the teachers, and the whole school. I cannot, however, refrain from mentioning a device, trivial indeed, — perhaps even puerile — but one which has proved its value in developing some spirit of co-operation in the pupil. On every piece of English written at home the pupil writes below his name, "This is my best work. I'll stand by it." He has been told that this implies his willingness to get or to lose a position upon the excellence of any piece of work thus indorsed, considering, of course, his age and experience in the school. In case he cannot conscientiously write this, he states the extent to which the work is his best, and tells why he cannot stand upon the rest. In a vocational school like ours, this is a strong lever. The pupil feels that he has written his own recommendation. He has dignified his work.

OSCAR CHARLES GALLAGHER

*Head of the Department of English,
Boston High School of Commerce.*

Prosit Neujahr! — The Secretary takes advantage of this space to remind each member that he receives herewith the assurance of every other member's best wishes for a HAPPY NEW YEAR. He takes pleasure also in announcing that an able committee is enthusiastically at work upon a *Report on Aids* for a most promising March meeting. It gives him pleasure to report withal the most successful year in the history of the Association. Our influence has been felt in the National Conference; our members contributed largely to the successful October meeting of the N. E. Assoc. of Colleges and Preparatory Schools, on *The Crisis in English*; and the Springfield meeting has opened to us the possibilities of wider usefulness in the future. We have 300 members, but we need more. All who join from now on, this year, are "live" members until March 1910. But old or new, none is exempt from the responsibility of supplying the Secretary immediately (or sooner or later) with material for fresh leaflets. Turn over some new leaves — to him, NOW — *January first, 1909.*